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SELF-ABUSE.

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EXTRACT FROM THE REPORT

OF THE

ASYLUM FOR THE INSANE, TORONTO.

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SELF-ABUSE.

“AN ENSHROUDED MORAL PESTILENCE.”

I approach this section of my Report with considerable diffidence and reserve. The subject is a delicate one to discuss publicly, and it is only from a sense of duty, after mature deliberation, I venture to compile a section devoted to a portraiture of a deplorable class who make up nearly one-half of the population of our asylums, and specimens of whom are seen in numberless homes in every part of our land. Many of the victims are amiable and loveable in many other respects, and did we not know their secret history would command our esteem instead of our sympathy. Let me draw the picture of one typical case, and “from one, learn all.” His friends tell us that he is a good young man, yea, more, he is a religious enthusiast—a model of propriety and decorum for all the youths of the neighbourhood where he dwells to copy after and to admire. This may be true in a restricted sense, for he may not be aware of the enormity of his offence, nor what are the results of its continuance. He is retired in his disposition; to an unusual extent he is fond of solitude; his habits, it may be, lead him to loathe and shun the company of the opposite sex; his former loquacity has been succeeded by taciturnity; he is changeable in any plan or projects he may have on hand or in prospect, he indulges in unusual abstractedness of thought, his fondness for books has been followed by hatred of protracted studies, want of concentration of thought, loss of memory, and general lassitude. He may imagine himself afflicted with many diseases, especially dyspepsia and heart disease, and the symptoms may give functional monitions of the exciting and eccentric cause. He has a pale and bleached looking countenance with possibly a hectic flush on one or both cheeks. If we grasp the muscles of the body anywhere, we will find them flaccid and deficient in normal tone. Imperfect or impeded nour-



ishment is evident in all the physical domain. To him solitude hath charms, and the emotional is unreasonably active. A settled, sullen melancholy may afflict him and suicide may be the result, without "a reason why" being left behind. He has restless nights and possibly a panorama of dreams. He is either unusually docile and does his work in a semi-mechanical way (if done at all), or is unnaturally peevish, and impulsive. His appetite is as capricious as his disposition, and as a result the body and mind give way under the combined attacks of these persistent enemies. At the same time he has a skeleton in the house, whose ghastliness is not revealed except—it may be—to a bosom friend in a gloomy hour.

It needs no prescience to tell at once, that when a number of these symptoms are recognised with cognate ones, and no other apparent cause present, the vicious habit of self-abuse and its train of evils have taken a deep hold of him thus afflicted. His self-control is to a great extent lost, and like a dismantled hulk he is drifting helplessly towards the dangers of a lee shore, often without the least hope of a safe deliverance. It is a subject of great delicacy to discuss in a Public Report, but when it is a fact patent to all who have to do with the insane, that our asylums swarm with the victims of this "enshrouded moral pestilence," it is high time to repeat the warnings so often reiterated in vain, and endeavour to stimulate to sensitiveness the public conscience on this great and crying evil.

I wish that I could add that its deleterious effects were confined to one sex only. It is the bane of public and private schools among all classes of the community, if the victims who come to us from these schools are to be believed. A percentage alarmingly large of those who fill our wards come from those engaged in sedentary pursuits. I will not suggest why this should be the case. On enquiry, I find the abomination is taught and learned from one to another in many public institutions, and these sad lessons are conned "without fear and without reproach." It has become one of the crying sins of the day, and it is a matter of doubt in my mind, if even intemperance takes the lead as a baneful cause of insanity. The statistics of this Asylum show a decided preponderance in favour of the former as an existing factor. What shall be said of the tens of thousands in Canada composed

of both sexes, equally guilty, who do not reach asylums, but who drag out a miserable existence because of bodily and mental degeneration thereon ? The tendency and habit to commit these heinous offences are not simply wrongs against the person, bad as this is, but like all such vices, they are against the State. Just as surely as intemperance, scrofula and syphilis plant a diathesis in each of their victims, so will this depravity,—other things being equal—have a tendency to produce a like vice—dare I say —“to the third and fourth generation.” This vitiating habit does transmit the enfeebled body and weak intellect, which fall a willing and easy prey to any external condition or circumstances that leads to depravity and self-abasement. Like a stone thrown into a placid pool, from a central point the circles ever widen until the wavelets reach the distant shore. These persons may have their pockets full of recommendations as good moral characters, and may appear to be such as far as flagrant and external acts are concerned, but this deadly sin wherever found warps the moral nature and puts an end to constant truthfulness in words and actions. This is a terrible indictment, but its stern reality is borne out by the sad experience learned in every asylum in Christendom.

It is, however, not to be lost sight of, that this debasing vice, like that of intemperance, is sometimes the result of the initial stage—of the buddings of insanity, possibly before friends have had any intimation of the coming mental prostration. In such cases it is the effect, and not the cause nor the occasion of cerebral trouble. The blind impulse that no volition can control, because driven on by strong desire, may be one of the most prominent manifestations of insanity. This is often seen in the incipient stage of paresis, when the brainal condition leads to obscenity, self-abuse, and often to attempted or accomplished rape. Local traumatic irritation will produce priapism, with the usual results. It may be laid down as a rule that the same or kindred constitutional condition in the insane will lead to the same or symptomatic results. In such cases it is important to know what to charge to disease and what to vicious habits ; or it may be to the combination of both. It is just to some poor victims to state this fact, for such are objects of compassion. The majority can have no such plea, pitiful as it may be to them and friends. The mental and

physical wrecks that crowd along our corridors, "sow the wind and reap the whirlwind." Nor is this habit confined to any age or condition of life. Youth, middle-aged, hoary-headed, single and married are numbered among its victims. To parents, preachers, philanthropists and physicians is the appeal made to use every legitimate means at their disposal to crush out a national curse. This can only be done by educating the public mind to its enormity and the direful results. Let no false delicacy shut the mouth: let no vail of mock modesty cover the corroding ulcer: let not expediency postpone the warning word, while there is power to resist the blandishments of a siren tempter sitting by a dark pool of unholy passion, and singing to lure to destruction. The mighty vortex of this malign, secret and subtle influence is hourly contributing its desolating waves that even wash away the fabrics of empires. There is nothing more certain than the well-known historical fact, that the accumulated and ever-increasing potency of such vices do more to bring about the overthrow of empires than can any outside enemy. Such are doing their unseen and enervating work among youth and manhood, until a premature grave or an asylum retreat is their doom, or it may be a miserable heritage is bequeathed to sinless ones, unsought but inevitable in its results. This is the tragic end of myriads of those that seek temporary gratification, it may be ignorant as to the results on themselves and their posterity. They are overshadowed in the starless night of passion, which too often is followed by no morning, and leaves them pavilioned in the gloom of death in all its wide significance. The Christian world is full of noble agencies whose object is to rescue from hydra-headed temptation, many, whom a much boasted civilization leaves stranded, yet, outside of the warnings of the officers of insane asylums few steps have been taken through home influence, the pulpit, the press or the Christian association to educate the young as to the dire results of this habit. Many know not where it leads to, and were they enlightened in time could successfully resist and overcome this vice. It is often too late when they enter the portals of a madhouse to expostulate and entreat. The day of firm resolve and strong will may have passed away, and effects may have been produced that time cannot efface.

Would that the warning voice were heard beyond the limited

readers of a didactic Report ! Each example may be described in the language of the great British dramatist :

“ Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth,
Blasted with ecstasy.”

While it is true that many of those of otherwise unblamable morality are the victims, however unsuspected, yet it is not peculiar to them, for sinners of all grades are not exempt from its fell ravages, although probably not to such an extent, because their “ pleasant vices ” scourge them in another way, but in each and all “ the way of the transgressor is hard.”

“ The mills of God grind slowly.
But they grind exceeding small.”

The distinguished Maudsley puts the whole matter in a nutshell when he says: “ A fatal drain upon the vitality of the higher nervous centres may in certain cases be produced by the excessive exercise of physical function, by an excessive sexual indulgence, or by constant self-abuse. Nothing is more certain than that either of these causes will produce an enervation of nervous elements, which, if the exhausting vice be continued, passes by a further declension into degeneration, and actual destruction thereof. The flying pains and heaviness of the limbs, and the startings of the muscles, which follow an occasional sexual excess are signs of instability of nervous element in the spinal centres which if the cause is in continual operation may end in softening of the cord, and consequent paralysis. Nor do the supreme centres always escape ; the habit of self-abuse, notably gives rise to a peculiar and disagreeable form of insanity, characterised by intense self-feeling and conceit, extreme perversion of feeling and corresponding derangement of thought in the earliest stages, and later by failure of intelligence, nocturnal hallucination, and suicidal or homicidal propensities.”

Dr. Workman, my worthy predecessor, says in his report of 1865, of this vice, “ There is one cause of a physical form which I fear is very widely extended, but which I almost dread to mention, which all over this continent appears to be peopling our

asylums with a loathsome, abject and hopeless multitude of inmates. Its victims are not intemperate, nay, indeed, not unfrequently very temperate as to indulgence in alcoholic beverages -- these are very modest, very shy, very (dare I say it?) pious-- as such, at least, they often are sent here with sufficient credentials--very studious, very everything but what they really are. Would that one-tenth of all the zeal and intelligence and stirring eloquence, which has been expended on other not unimportant reforms, could be enlisted in the exposition and amelioration of this enshrouded pestilence! But who will venture on such a work?"

In the report of 1866 he truthfully says: "The time has now come when, in my opinion, silence or inaction, not merely on the part of Medical Superintendents but of every man in society who knows anything of the evil under consideration, or can in any way contribute to its removal or mitigation, should be regarded as criminal. The responsibility of the medical profession and of the clergy, as well as that of the whole body of educationalists, is infinitely more weighty than they have ever yet regarded it. *They well know* that all I have written on the subject not only is true but it falls very far short of the *whole* truth, and yet it seems impossible to move them. What sort of account of the use made by them of the talents committed and of the opportunities presented to them will they be able to present at the great day of reckoning? It is, however, but just to the clergy to state that some of them are very imperfectly informed in relation to the subject now treated of. I have known numerous instances in which clergymen have given to patients whose insanity was mainly ascribed to secret vice the highest testimonials of moral excellence and even of religious worth.

"The first rational step towards the removal of an evil is the recognition of its existence and the ascertainment of its magnitude. Many persons are, I believe, in the present instance, ignorant of these facts--yet such persons may be parents, or may have the guardianship of youth. How are they to protect those under their care against an evil the existence of which is unknown to them?"

These are weighty words from men of experience. My limited observations lead me to indorse these pungent sentences. The

difficulty that lies in the way of arousing that dormant entity called the public conscience, is the insidious way this vice does its work. Canker-like, its destructive tendency is slow but potent for evil. Were its ravages as evident to the senses as consumption, cholera or small-pox, a cry of horror would rise from one end of the land to the other were remedial and sanitary measures not taken at once to cure the evil, as far as human skill and foresight could do it. Here is a worm, eating at the core of society, and doing more injury than all these diseases combined, yet there is no warning cry from or to the objects of pity. Parents are too modest, timid, and reticent to tell their children of its dire effects. The pulpit cannot see its way clear to discuss it from a religious stand point. I am glad to say there are a few noble exceptions who, in their public and private duties are doing good service in fearlessly exposing its evils among those they labour, and for whose spiritual oversight they must give an account. The medical profession is being aroused to the enormities of self-pollution among its patients, and although the cross-examinations into the habits of many invalids whose histories tell the same sad story often lead to estrangement and loss of practice, yet, to the lasting credit of many I know, they are not thereby deterred from being lay preachers in the cause of humanity. I would that the combined testimony of asylum officers were hung up in the sight of every family, and conned in the light of unimpeachable statistics of insanity and morality! If no other way to reach the public is likely to be adopted than through the press, then I would suggest that a pamphlet should be issued on the subject, and sent broadcast throughout the community. It might be objected that many who are ignorant of this habit might learn it in the suggestions thus promulgated. In reply to this I may say it is my firm conviction that there are not two per cent. of the adult population who can be classed in this way, and "the greatest good to the greatest number" is a wise rule to go by.

There is no doubt that the statements made concerning this secret vice will be vehemently denied by those who know nothing about its prevalency, except in a very limited degree. Let such visit asylums and also read the reports presented by their officers from all parts of Britain and America year after year, especially the tables of "Causes of Insanity" and if they have

any "bowels of compassion" left, they will shudder at the record. Cutting irony, withering sarcasm, and unsparing invective, are launched in power and profusion—and justly too—against flagrant vice, and national sins. Let each of us contribute our mite of influence to excoriate a viper passion, which is silently doing a deadly work among our loved ones unheeded and unrebuked. The Hebrews took heroic measures to purge themselves of the "uncleanness." The ancients and modern heathens record its evils, and the latter take vigorous steps to prevent it. If a Christian community fears for the modesty of its youth in expressing it, and condemning it notwithstanding its soul-destroying influence, I cannot help it; my duty has been performed, for "I am in a place where I am demanded of conscience to speak the truth, the truth therefore speak I, impugn it whoso listeth."

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